

Highlights of [GAO-03-1091](#), a report to The Honorable Lamar Smith, House of Representatives

### Why GAO Did This Study

Policy makers need valid, reliable, and timely information on the outcomes of criminal justice programs to help them decide how to set criminal justice funding priorities. In view of previously reported problems with selected outcome evaluations managed by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), GAO assessed the methodological quality of a sample of completed and ongoing NIJ outcome evaluation grants.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NIJ

- review its ongoing outcome evaluation grants and develop appropriate strategies and corrective measures to ensure that methodological design and implementation problems are overcome so the evaluations can produce more conclusive results;
- continue efforts to respond to GAO's 2002 recommendation that NIJ assess its evaluation process with the purpose of developing approaches to ensure that future outcome evaluations are funded only when they are effectively designed and implemented.

In commenting on a draft of this report, DOJ agreed with GAO's recommendations, and cited several current and planned activities intended to improve NIJ's evaluation program. DOJ also made two substantive comments related to the presentation of information that GAO responded to in the report.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/gettrpt?GAO-03-1091](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/gettrpt?GAO-03-1091).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand (202) 512-8777 or [ekstrandl@gao.gov](mailto:ekstrandl@gao.gov).

## JUSTICE OUTCOME EVALUATIONS

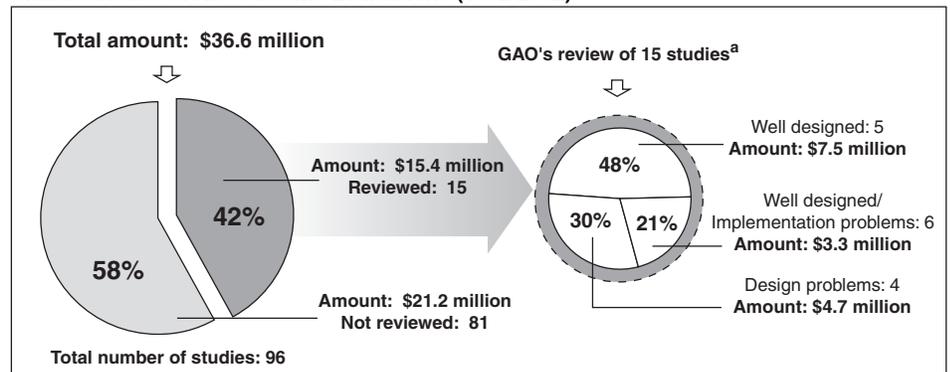
### Design and Implementation of Studies Require More NIJ Attention

#### What GAO Found

From 1992 through 2002, NIJ managed 96 evaluation studies that sought to measure the outcomes of criminal justice programs. Spending on these evaluations totaled about \$37 million. Our methodological review of 15 of the 96 studies, totaling about \$15 million and covering a broad range of criminal justice issues, showed that sufficiently sound information about program effects could not be obtained from 10 of the 15. Five studies, totaling about \$7.5 million (or 48 percent of the funds spent on the studies we reviewed), appeared to be methodologically rigorous in both design and implementation, enabling meaningful conclusions to be drawn about program effects. Six studies, totaling about \$3.3 million (or 21 percent of the funds spent on the studies we reviewed), began with sound designs but encountered implementation problems that would render their results inconclusive. An additional 4 studies, totaling about \$4.7 million (or 30 percent of the funds spent on the studies we reviewed), had serious methodological limitations that from the start limited their ability to produce reliable and valid results. Although results from 5 completed studies were inconclusive, DOJ program administrators said that they found some of the process and implementation findings from them to be useful.

We recognize that optimal conditions for the scientific study of complex social programs almost never exist, making it difficult to design and execute outcome evaluations that produce definitive results. However, the methodological adequacy of NIJ studies can be improved, and NIJ has taken several steps—including the formation of an evaluation division and funding feasibility studies—in this direction. It is too soon to tell whether these changes will lead to evaluations that will better inform policy makers about the effectiveness of criminal justice programs.

Characteristics of NIJ Outcome Evaluations (1992-2002)



Source: GAO analysis of NIJ data.

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.